



# What is **Community**-Based Art Education?

**W**ith regard to definitions of community-based art education, several concepts come to mind. One might initially envision organized community art programs to improve art skills, or alternatively, outreach programs to empower special groups of people. With more thought, we might consider programs that promote contextual learning about local art and culture (Kincheloe, et al., 2000; Neperud, 1995).

**BY J. ULBRICHT**

Community service projects (Taylor, 2002) are another form of community-based art education. Some may see public art itself as a form of community-based education. This range of possibilities can be confusing for those who contemplate the possibilities and implications of new and existing community-based art education programs.

Today educators may feel the need to contemplate community-based education when (1) well intentioned citizens try to figure out what they can do to support or reform school art programs; (2) arts administrators seek to advance their enrollment figures; (3) citizens try to eliminate art education from school curriculums; (4) teachers try to figure out how to get students involved in “real world” situations; and/or (5) educators and artists confront important social issues through their artistic endeavors.



B.J. Smiley Goins's mural photographs (left and above) educate the public about art in parts of the Austin community.

At the risk of drifting away from some of the traditional focuses of art education, art educators need to take a careful look at the rationales, goals, and definitions of community-based art education before dismissing it, or conversely, implementing new programs of their own. Although several art educators (Bolin, 1999; Clark & Zimmerman, 2000; Congdon, Blandy & Bolin, 2001) have illustrated their concepts and implemented new courses and programs (Fahey & Frickman, 2000; Garber, 2004), it is the purpose of this article to take a second look at various forms of community-based art education and propose ideas for future curriculum initiatives.

### Informal Teaching

If community-based art education is defined broadly as something that takes place outside of K-12 schools, it is not a new form of art education. Informal teaching has been and is the dominant method by which individuals learn about art. If we think of art education in communities, each culture and historical period has had its own methods of teaching individuals about art. Renaissance artists frequently taught apprentices about their ways of working, and traditionally folk art

is passed down from generation to generation in non-school settings. In the pre-industrial period prior to the latter part of the 19th century, arts and crafts skills were taught in many middle and working class homes. Wealthier parents often provided an education in connoisseurship through foreign travel and museum visits. We could consider many of these teachers as "invisible" (Ulbricht, 1999) because they have not had formal art education classes.

Although we often think of community-based art education as "teacher" initiated, we are increasingly aware of the informal "education" that is provided by visual culture. With the expansion of technology and visual media, increasing numbers of citizens are learning about a range of issues through imagery and we could consider this another form of community-based art education.

### Organized Community Teaching

In the past hundred years, many teachers have made community-based art education more formal in a number of organized programs. In rural areas of the U.S., craft schools (i.e. Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Penland School of Crafts, and Haystack Mountain School of

Crafts) emphasize education in traditional art materials and skills. In urban areas, museum schools (i.e. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, and School of the Art Institute of Chicago) provide opportunities for citizens to learn about art.

Although many historical programs were the result of individuals who had traditional and modernist art perspectives, there are other community-based programs that tried to distance themselves from the canon and focus on the needs of individuals. As noted by Goldbard (1993) and Dreeszen (1994) in Congdon, Blandy, & Bolin (2001), what many people think of as community-based arts education may have been inspired by programs such as the Village Improvement Movement (1853), City Beautiful Movement (1893), Outdoor Art Movement (1899), Works Progress Administration (1933), Cooperative Extension Service (1937), and/or the San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program (1960s).

Today, with our pluralistic postmodern perspectives, arts educators often design new community-based programs specifically for local citizens and special groups including at-risk youth, homeless individuals, older adults, handicapped people, gifted and talented individuals, the incarcerated, and others not always included in mainstream K-12 art classrooms. Such programs take place in schools, park facilities, arts centers, art museums, retirement centers, and store-front galleries, in addition to local, state and federal prisons. Sponsoring institutions are often nonprofit and governmental, although one can also find a growing number of for-profit businesses where individuals can “drop in” to use studio facilities.

An example of a “formal” community-based art program can be seen in *Totally Cool, Totally Art*, an after-school program for adolescents, initiated in 1996 and operated through the Austin (Texas) Parks and Recreation Department. The program includes multiple and continuing 4-week art classes in specific media taught by local artists. The goals of the program include art education in traditional art skills for personal self-expression.

## Outreach

Another form of community-based education exists in various outreach programs. Some outreach programs make a special effort to create supportive art environments, while others attempt to promote the values and strengths of formal education to bridge the gap between art understandings of different communities. In many cases, individuals who are educated in art feel that they can awaken the artistic sensibilities of others by showing them the functions of art in specific communities.<sup>1</sup>

Outreach programs have the potential to empower individuals as seen in the example of *Imagine Art* (n.d.), a nonprofit organization created by Debbie Boyd for handicapped individuals to support their personal artistic endeavors. This grant-securing organization used its resources to provide disadvantaged individuals of all ages with art supplies, studio space, individual instruction, and gallery exhibitions. Funds also assisted teachers who work with special students in local schools.

In a slightly different manner, artists and educators sometimes present themselves and their programs through outreach endeavors and exhibitions that recognize artistic achievements in hopes that the public will support them in the future (Ulbricht, 2002a). Museum

educators engage in a form of outreach when they target certain groups of individuals through community programs that promote interest in their collections and exhibitions. Viewers see a form of community-based outreach in Internet postings that outline institutional services and programs. Thus, community-based outreach programs can have a variety of functions including those of empowerment and promotion.

## Ethnography

While many community-based art education programs provide opportunities for expression and art learning, there is another type of education that encourages students to learn about local communities and community-based art. Adejumo (2000) defined “community-based art” as a term to describe works of art produced by people living within the same locality, and defined by common interests such as shared concerns, cultural heritages, traditions, and language patterns. Although this art is not usually the subject of most art history texts, it is noteworthy and should be studied.

McFee (1961) and Neperud (1995) motivated a focus on community-based art and education. London (1994) supported their efforts by encouraging teachers to take students outside and actively consider the environments in which they lived. Many of these initiatives implement a pluralistic and democratic approach to art and education (Blandy & Congdon, 1987).



Above and right: B.J. Smiley Goins's mural photographs in the Austin community.





Today, we are encouraged to conduct community-based art and cultural research as contemporary artists, ethnographers, documentary photographers, preservationists, and conservators have done (Desai, 2002). To bridge the gap between theory and practice, community-based research is a growing concern in higher education (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Artists who learn about communities through their work include B. J. Smiley Goins, a photographer who documented over 200 murals in Austin, Texas. Goins's photographs show the murals in various stages of development and deterioration. Her documentary work provides viewers with a "snapshot" of community-based art that is continually changing.

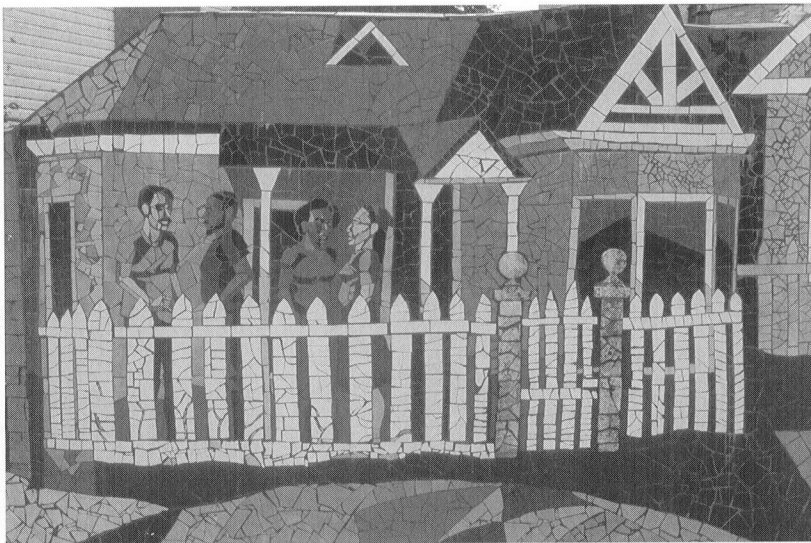
Another example of community-based research and learning can be seen in the work of Ricardo Ainslie (1995, 2004) who interviewed residents in the troubled communities of Jasper and Anson, Texas, to learn of their concerns. After completing his research, Ainslie coordinated the development of a movie and photographic exhibition, respectively, that focused on issues in each community. Learning about individual cultures is an important form of community-based art education and can be the basis of future works of art and literature.

### Public Art

Beyond the programs mentioned here, artists are creating another form of community-based art education for the

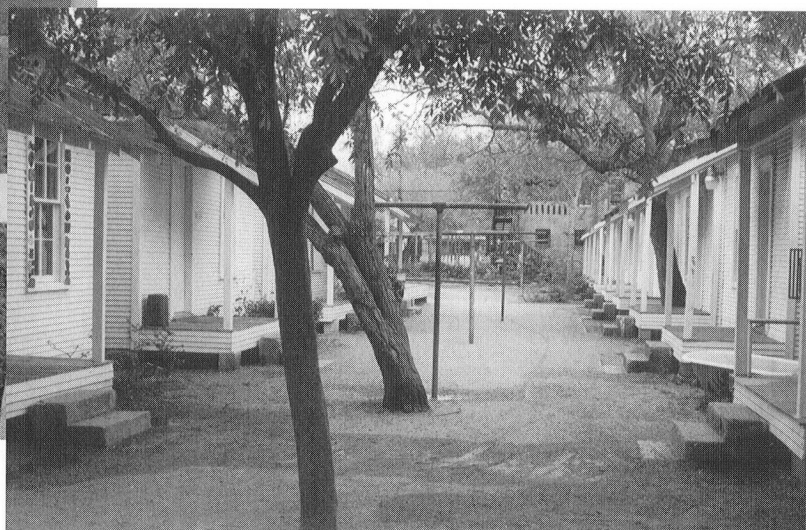
public. Many community-based artists are concerned with art that functions in different types of public arenas, including community development, corrections, education, intergenerational communication, aging, the environment, healthcare, technology, politics, disability, conflict resolution, community regeneration, cultural citizenship, and more (Schwarzman & deNobriga, 1999). Because contemporary artists often create collaborative art that provokes social interaction (Van Laar & Diepeveen, 1998), we can consider their work as another form of community-based art education.

As an example of community-based art, we can look at the work of John Yancey (Bass, 2004), an artist who is known for his murals on the south side of Chicago. Recently with a grant from the City of Austin and input from community members, Yancey constructed one of the largest freestanding pieces of public art in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of East Austin. Yancey's mural sculpture commemorates the lives of individuals who inhabited the landscape long before those who live there now. His monument will provide community education for years to come.



Above and right: *Rhapsody*, freestanding mural sculpture by John Yancey. Austin, Texas, 2003. Photographs by Errol Zimmerman.





Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas.  
Photography by B.J. Smiley Goins.

We see an example of community-based art for social change in the work of Rick Lowe, the creator of Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas. With the help of many sponsors, Lowe revitalized a neighborhood by saving 22 houses in Houston that the city planned to demolish. With public and private support, he restored the houses and remodeled them into gallery, office, day-care, school, storage, workshop, and living spaces for people who inhabited the area years earlier. Lowe's project gives local citizens a place to reflect and contemplate a brighter future.

### Implications

Obviously, the categories defined earlier are not mutually exclusive. Programs that educate or memorialize also empower. Community-based programs and projects have a continuum of purposes. At one extreme of the spectrum reside programs that teach traditional art skills and knowledge. Others are about learning to appreciate local cultures with no intent of social reconstruction (Bastos, 2002). At the far end of the spectrum are projects designed for social change (Schwarzman & deNobriga, 1999).

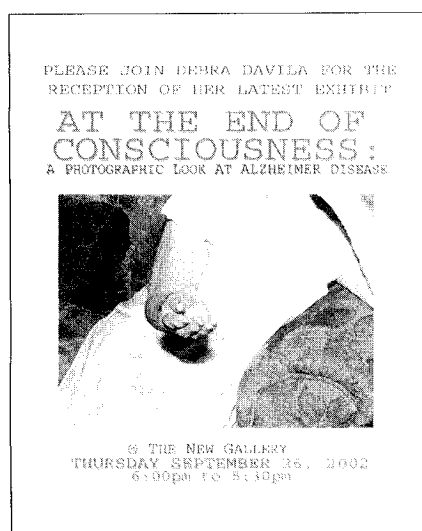
Given the examples cited, K-12 art teachers should not be concerned about the duplication of their efforts. They should incorporate the strengths of what students are learning in both informal and more organized extra-curricular education. Since students learn much about art in their individual communities, teachers should build on what they have already learned.

While teachers may have difficulty organizing community-based ethnographic art studies during school hours, it is an endeavor that can be achieved through various forms of after-school and

Internet information interviewing (Ulbricht, 2002b) or photographic expeditions. Students can learn about people by investigating the material culture in their communities. Today many artists and architects engage in a form of ethnography before designing and building projects that fit or engage community interests.

With regard to outreach, there are ways that classroom teachers can help their students participate. Today there is a renewed interest in voluntary service and service learning for students (Furco, 2002). The Federal Government's Learn and Serve program (Corporation for National and Community Service, n.d.) funds and rewards schools that stimulate student interest in community service and many schools are creating their own programs.<sup>2</sup> Although many schools encourage service in existing agencies, students could create new projects as is the purpose of one university project (Cherwitz & Sullivan, 2002).

In an artistic form, students could envision and design art projects that have social impact. Recently, I asked a group of students to design community-based art projects.<sup>3</sup> They proposed ideas such as a contemplation garden for people in a hectic world, a photographic exhibit for people who did not fully comprehend the dimensions of Alzheimer's disease, an art journal for fledgling artists, and an installation about terrorism to show how treacherous our situation has become.



Each project showed a degree of empathy for a unique community and gave students an opportunity to use their art skills to deal with the world through art. Obviously, the creators of these projects may need funding and approval to complete their projects but the mere contemplation process helped students envision community-based projects and ideas not commonly explored in regular art classrooms.

## Conclusions

Community-based art education has various definitions. By taking a second look at these definitions a variety of ideas for future studies and curriculum initiatives are visible. Although the depictions highlighted above are not mutually exclusive, classroom teachers can begin to see opportunities for enhanced skill development, collaboration, communication, and empowerment. If art teachers and students can clarify their community-based art education definitions and objectives, they then can envision meaningful projects and programs that are enriching and educational.

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**Students can learn about people by investigating the material culture in their communities. Today many artists and architects engage in a form of ethnography before designing and building projects that fit or engage community interests.**



Public art defaced. Photography by B.J. Smiley Goins.



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to Bellah, et al., (1985) a *community* is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define community and are nurtured by it. We can define groups in terms of geography, ethnicity, gender, or economic and educational levels.

<sup>2</sup>Learn and Serve America supports service-learning programs across the country by providing funding, training, and special Leader School designations. At present, 200 Leader Schools include the Perry Meridian High School (Indianapolis, Indiana) which began incorporating service-learning into its curriculum in 1998. More than one-third of the school's 1,700 students participate in various service-learning projects. Currently, the program has 39 separate offerings in 13 different departments. One special service-learning program encourages students to work at a local shelter for victims of domestic abuse and their children. Students in another project help local civic leaders with their community transportation research. Local leaders have commended the students for their ingenuity, thoughtfulness, and efforts to solve local problems.

<sup>3</sup>The author taught a university Visual Art Careers class that made use of ethnographic techniques to analyze the multiple roles of community artists.